



# Latino Lives in America

*Making It Home*

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Another major set of reforms calls for increased parental involvement, as part of a strategy of community-based empowerment to further enrich systemic reform. These efforts are fundamentally premised on the anticipated benefits of parents having greater knowledge of the educational process in schools. Schools are expected to benefit from the labor and other services that parents can perform, but a more critical contribution derives from parents, under this theory, better appreciating the difficult task that teachers and administrators have, as well as gaining knowledge as to how to better support their children in schools. Under this reform strategy, there is a very clear assumption of value convergence flowing almost organically between teachers' and administrators' expectations of parents and the expectations that parents will then have of themselves, of their children as students, and of the schools (Quiocho and Daoud 2006). Finally, democratic institutional reforms, such as increasing the election of Latino school board members and selection of Latino school administrators, is based on the assumption that parents as voters and advocates know how to best identify candidates to support (Fraga, Meier, and England 1986; Meier and Juenke 2005; Meier and Stewart 1991). The greater the likelihood that a candidate of first choice will be elected, the greater the incentive for Latino citizen parents, as voters, to study educational issues, assess candidates on the basis of their issue positions, and ultimately elect candidates who are more likely to address educational issues of direct concern to Latino parents. Again, the value convergence between expectations of parents, students, and schools drives the expected gains that are to result from such reform efforts.

The evidence from our focus group participants clearly indicates that reform efforts relying on value convergence to improve the quality of educational opportunities available to all students, including Latinos, so they can begin to realize the opportunities that can lead to upward mobility should have enthusiastic supporters among Latino parents. It would be unfortunate if this value convergence went unrecognized or was not fully utilized by school reformers and educational officials. Should this happen, the implications for Latino children will be clear: further increases in enrollment segregation, continuing high dropout rates, and the potential continuity of low academic attainment.

## 4 Exploring Discrimination, Intergroup Relations, and Intragroup Relations among Latinos

As Latinos have become an increasingly large part of the American population, how they feel they are viewed and treated by others gains significance as a social and political issue—for the Latino population itself as well as the broader society. More specifically, perceptions of discrimination, prejudice, and unfair treatment are indicative of how Latinos understand the larger social structure and their place within it. Further, these perceptions have been shown to have implications for a sense of group identity, political participation and alienation (for example, civic engagement, lack of trust; Schildkraut 2007).

How do Latinos perceive their relationships with *other groups*, including discrimination from other groups, and what might that imply for their sense of community and belonging in the United States? Do they perceive discrimination *within* their own group—and what might this suggest for the sense of a pan-ethnic Latino community? Do current perceptions of discrimination among Latinos indicate continuity or change from what we know about these perceptions in the past? These questions—which have yet to be explored in the context of the massive Latino immigration of the 1990s—are the focus of this chapter.



## 2 Trying for the American Dream

### *Barriers to Making the United States "Home"*

In a focus group in Los Angeles, the moderator asked our participants, "Can you ever imagine immigrating to Mexico and becoming a citizen?" The immediate response from multiple people was an emphatic NO! "Why not?" asked the moderator. One man explained: "It's the freedom here, the economy. There's no pay there." Another man simply stated: "It's the American dream." The "American dream" is a term that has been in usage for a long time by persons throughout the United States. It is a subjective expression that means different things to different people but usually implies achieving a successful and satisfying life as a result of hard work (Adams 1934; Cullen 2003). While many people measure their achievements in life in material terms, such as earning a high income or owning a house, others' perceptions of living the American dream are more abstract, typically described in terms of having personal freedom, enjoying equal rights, and ensuring safety or security for self and family (Hochschild 1995). The allure of the American dream has been pointed to as the motivation of countless generations of immigrants who came to the United States to escape the lack of opportunity and poor quality of life in their home countries. Yet, critics of Latino immigration, especially immi-

gration from Mexico, warn that unless Latinos better assimilate into mainstream society, they will not be sharing in the "American dream" (Huntington 2004a).

What does "living the dream" mean to Latinos? What are they willing to do to achieve that life? What role does assimilation play in their efforts to achieve their life goals? In this chapter, we endeavor to answer these questions. Before we examine what the dream means for our focus group participants, we first examine more systematically how most people in this country think about the American dream. Then we briefly review the conceptual development and controversy of assimilation and consider whether Latinos view "assimilation"—or at least some sense of assimilation—as their path to the American dream. Finally, we look at the extent to which Latinos are integrating into majority society—becoming part of the American fabric—by focusing on select aspects of cultural, structural, and marital assimilation as evidenced in the attitudes and behaviors of our focus group participants and some of the aggregate indicators from the Latino National Survey and other studies.

### Definitions, Barriers, and Attaining the American Dream

As points of comparison, before we discuss what "living the American dream" means to Latinos, we should have some idea of what the dream means for most Americans. Besides their definitions, we should know what they feel are barriers to obtaining it and to what extent they believe the dream is attainable, both personally and for other people. Two national surveys, conducted independently in 2004<sup>1</sup> and 2007,<sup>2</sup> focus on each of these topics.

The targeted populations of the two surveys were distinctly different. The 2004 survey was designed to ensure a broad representation of the total U.S. adult population. Demographic comparisons of the surveyed respondents with U.S. census data suggest the 2004 survey was highly successful in capturing the views of the general population. The 2007 survey was intended to measure the attitudes of workers in non-supervisory positions. The demographic profile of 2007 respondents was obviously less representative of the general adult population, but these comparatively younger, less educated, less affluent, and primarily

blue-collar and service industry employees more closely match the aggregate characteristics of the U.S. Latino population (Ramirez and de la Cruz 2002).

In the first survey, 1,002 respondents were asked: "How do you personally define the American dream?" and were allowed to provide up to three definitions. Financial security/stability was the most frequently provided response (24%). Good jobs/careers and personal freedom tied for the second most commonly provided answer; both were cited by 14%. Having a family (13%) and living comfortably (12%) rounded out the five most mentioned definitions (National League of Cities [NLC] 2004). However, significant racial/ethnic, generational, and social class differences were apparent in the collection of definitions.

"Having choices" or "freedom" was significantly more likely to be mentioned by non-Hispanic whites 18- to 29-year-olds, college graduates, and those with household incomes over \$75,000. "Financial stability" was the top definition voiced by nonwhites, blue-collar workers, and those making less than \$30,000. "Good health" was the dominant factor in older respondents' version of the dream (NLC 2004: 6).

When given a predetermined list of definitions and asked to select only two, respondents' priorities changed somewhat but components of the dream remained essentially the same. "Living in freedom" became the top definition (33%), followed by "being financially secure" (26%), "a quality education for my children" (17%), "having a family" (17%), and "enjoying good health" (16%). Having "a good job" (9%) dropped out of the top five, placing a somewhat distant sixth among the offered definitions, which also included "owning a home" (8%), "living in a good community" (6%), and "a secure retirement" (6%). One quarter of the respondents volunteered that everything on this list was part of their American dream (NLC 2004: 28).

When respondents were asked to select two of the most serious barriers or obstacles to achieving the dream from a list of ten items, "poor quality public education" was the most frequently chosen answer (27%). The remaining top five selections were "not being financially secure" (22%), "inability to find a good-paying job" (19%), "limited access to health care or health insurance" (17%), and "racial or ethnic discrimination" (14%). Interestingly, in a separate question, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement "Where I

live (community, city, or town) has limited my ability to achieve the American dream" and 31% agreed (NLC 2004: 29, 31).

According to this survey, however, Americans remain optimistic about their personal situation: Two thirds of the respondents said they were currently living the American dream. Among those who reported they were *not* living the dream, a majority were still somewhat (33%) or very confident (19%) that they eventually would. They had considerably less confidence in others' abilities; 67% agreed with the statement "The American dream is becoming more difficult for average people to obtain," and 70% also agreed that "It is becoming much harder for young families to achieve" (NLC 2004: 30).

In the second comparison survey, a national sample of 800 non-supervisory workers<sup>3</sup> was asked an open-ended question of what the American dream meant to them; 37% provided answers that focused on the basics of personal economic security, saying that it meant "having a good job," "being able to make a comfortable living," and the more general answer of "financial security." Having a good place to live or raise a family was also cited by 29% of the respondents. Other less frequently offered definitions included personal freedom (15%), owning a home (14%), and having opportunity/choice in life (9%) (Lake Research Partners [LRP] 2007: 6-7).

When asked to assess the importance of American dream-related or life goals identified by others, 80% ranked "having a job that pays enough to support a family" as extremely important, 75% ranked "having affordable quality health care on a dependable basis" as extremely important, and 74% said "having the means to ensure his/her children have the opportunity to succeed" was also extremely important. After these three economic concerns, "being treated with respect" was the next most important component of the American dream for these workers (71% ranked extremely important) (LRP 2007: 8).

When asked to name the number one reason the American dream was becoming more difficult to reach, 49% gave income-related reasons (for example, low wages, high cost of living, lack of good jobs). Tied for second place, about 10% said the primary obstacle was politics or was the government's fault, while an equal percentage cited changes in Americans' morals or work ethic. In third place, 8% cited problems in education.

Although a majority believed the dream was still obtainable, three quarters of those surveyed felt it was becoming harder to achieve. In sharp contrast to the 2004 survey, in which two thirds reported they had already obtained the American dream, only 18% of these working-class respondents felt they were currently living the dream (see Table 2-1). Nearly 70% felt that policies of the government would determine the future for the American dream.

A closer inspection of the results of both surveys suggests one obvious divergent pattern in respondents' answers. Social class (education, job type, and income) significantly constrains individuals' definitions of the American dream as well as perceptions of its attainability. The answers of college-educated, white-collar workers with more affluent incomes suggest that the sense of individual freedom, having options and making choices, are key ingredients of the American dream. Most believe they will or already have attained the dream. In sharp contrast, for those without college degrees, in blue-collar jobs making considerably less money, the goal of being able to financially provide for their family and their future is foremost in their minds when they describe what it means to be "living the dream." Many believe this goal is attainable, but very few feel like they have achieved it. How do these two distinct visions of the American dream compare with those held by Latinos?

TABLE 2-1 COMPARISON OF THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND ANSWERS TO AMERICAN DREAM QUESTIONS, AMONG 2004 NCL AND 2007 LRP SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Comparison	2004 Respondents	2007 Respondents
Representativeness of survey respondents	General population including more white collar	Exclusively blue-collar, working-class
Most frequently cited definition of American dream	Living in freedom	Economic security
Most frequently cited barrier to American dream	Poor quality of education	Income/employment concerns
Percentage who believe they have achieved the American dream	66%	18%

NCL = National League of Cities; LRP = Lake Research Partners

## Living the *Americano* Dream

Unlike the surveys, in which respondents were asked direct questions, the focus groups were not specifically solicited for their thoughts on the American dream. However, the notion of wanting the dream and the process or actions required for achieving it emerged *independently* as a theme in focus group conversations across the country. At least four participants made specific reference to the concept, and there were numerous comments—regarding participants' life goals or ambitions, barriers that impeded their efforts, and the progress (or lack thereof) that they thought they had made in attaining those goals—that can be used to depict what living the *Americano* dream means to Latinos.

In major ways, the dream seems to have the same meaning for Latinos as it does for other working-class Americans. With a few exceptions, most notably the English-language focus groups in Washington, DC, the demographics of our focus group participants closely mirror the demographic profile of respondents in the 2007 survey. And, like the workers surveyed in 2007, our participants' comments also focused most on the comforts that come from having good-paying, steady jobs. They want to own homes in safe neighborhoods with high-quality schools for their children. They also want to be respected and treated fairly. Freedoms associated with the First Amendment were important to only a few.

The central focus of the dream for Latinos is the financial security that comes with regular employment. Foremost, they want *good jobs*. Every focus group assessed particulars of their personal employment status and the general climate of jobs available to Latinos. With the exception of a few who originally came to this country to further their education or to flee dangers of political instability at home, most participants acknowledged that Latinos came to the United States primarily to find work. This is certainly not a surprise (Alba and Nee 2003). Recently arrived immigrants reveled at the fact that they were able to find "many good-paying jobs." Later generations, and some of the immigrants who had spent significant portions of their lives in the United States, prized finding jobs that paid well too, but they also were more likely to wish for (and if they had it, to express satisfaction with) a positive working environment (that is, providing "benefits," "good relations with co-workers," "respect and trust from supervisors," and having jobs

that they preferred over “jobs that no one else would do”). In Dalton, GA, for example, respondents noted their preference, not just for any work, but for what they perceive as *good* work:

*Pablo, immigrant (Dalton, GA, S):*<sup>4</sup> I have not seen any difficulties. I like it here, jobs are well paid and because they are not out on the fields.

*Valdemar, U.S. born (Dalton, GA, S):* I like it because the majority of jobs offer good benefits, like medical insurance.

Another component of the *Americano* dream, a part that is greatly dependent on getting good-paying jobs, is being able to move *away from rough parts of town* or to move *out of the barrios*. A conversation thread found in groups held in all the major cities was the desire to avoid or escape the “noise” (from too many “people crowded together,” “bottles breaking,” and “gunshots”), the “drugs,” the “gangs,” and other bad elements. Contrary to recent commentary that recent Latino arrivals choose to remain in ethnic enclaves separated from the Anglo population (cf. Huntington 2004b), a majority of those in our focus groups wanted away from the places that had “too many” of their co-ethnics. We see examples in the Miami and New York City focus groups:

*Multiple respondents (Miami, S):* “Little Havana is a bad neighborhood.” “It’s really bad. . . . Now there are gangs and thieves.” “There’s so many [Latinos].” “You can’t leave your house. People just sit in their house.” “The houses they depreciate there.” “The culture is depreciated; there’s criminals and drugs.” “I want away from there.” (*Collective agreement*): “Yeah.”

*Ivan (New York, E):* What I like is that there are not many Latinos. It is very quiet, I feel that there is peace. I don’t hear the noise . . . so it is peaceful.

*Victor (New York, E):* I like the neighborhood where I live now because it is quiet, it’s clean. Everyone is working people. It is quiet most of the time. I lived in Harlem for 28 years and the reason I left is because I had two big bullet holes on my wall, and I said I better get out of here before I get killed because of these guys out there selling drugs. I said I had to

work hard. Back then I used to do things foolishly, but now I save my money and use it wisely. I LIKE where I live now.

A third component of the *Americano* dream is the goal of *home ownership* in a community that is good for raising a family. With very few exceptions, participants indicated how much they valued being able to purchase a home in a quiet neighborhood that had safe streets and good schools for their children. Every focus group had people mention their goal (either desired or realized) to live in a place that was “quiet,” “tranquil,” and “safe” enough for “children [to] play outside” or where they could “walk the street at night” without fear.

*Eric (New York, E):* Where I live now is day and night from where I grew up. Even now when I go to visit my mom, who still lives in the projects, it is LOUD, there are people all over the place, music, throwing bottles. . . . I don’t want to go back. I am working very hard to buy a house.

*Nicholas (Houston, E):* Now I got it GOOD . . . I moved out [of Alief, TX] and over by I-464. Just bought a brand-new house. It’s quiet . . . We got a three-bedroom home and it’s quiet. I love it! I don’t hear sirens. I love it! . . . I know I don’t have children yet . . . but I always wanted something where I knew my kids would grow up safely and in a good area.

*Roberto (Miami, S):* The tranquility in the streets. My kid can play ball in the street. . . . The unity of family is important where I live, neighbors with families. It is safe and you get a sense of security.

*Quality education* for their children or themselves is another integral part of the *Americano* dream. Contrary to some popular opinion that Latinos have low expectations and low priorities for education (Badillo 2006), participants in all of our groups referred to the importance of education, especially “having good schools for their children” and “more education” for Latinos in general.

*Elsa (Muscatine, IA, S):* I am proud to see Hispanic students on honor rolls and to see more Hispanic young adults attending college.



*Francisca, immigrant (Houston, S):* [S]ome Hispanics are better prepared than others, right? At least for me. I studied nursing, and for 10 years I worked to support myself as a voluntary [nurse], over there [in Mexico]. . . . When I came here I felt comfortable when I saw a Hispanic, but I have seen that because they are better prepared with English and all, is like they treat us with inferiority. Now that I have my kids I want them to study and prepare themselves to go farther than me.

The final part of the dream for Latinos is to *be treated fairly and respectfully by others*. In every focus group there was discussion about perceived discourteous behavior or discrimination from Anglos and other Latinos (we look more closely at these comments in Chapter 4). However, these discussions were often balanced by comments regarding positive interactions and how much they appreciated it when these occurred. The following experience provided by a naturalized Latino in Houston conveys both the sting felt by discriminatory treatment and the sincere appreciation for a salesman who treated him well:

*Fernando (Houston, S):* Once, I was helping one of my cousins to buy a car. . . . When we got there we saw a Hispanic guy. We said to ourselves, "We are lucky, he is going to give us a hand." We felt supported. We came close, he saw us and ignored us; he didn't help us. I think because of the way we were dressed and maybe because he thought we were Hispanics and we might not have money, or he thought we didn't have enough to put down about \$500, or who knows, but he did not want to help us. Then, an African American came and asked, "How may I help you?" So, we told him that we would like to buy a car. He said, "Okay," he helped us very well, much better than we expected, and on top of that he gave us a discount on the car. My cousin gave the money to pay for the car in full and, in cash, as appreciation for his help my cousin gave him \$500. He went in front of the Hispanic that was working there and told him, "For not wanting to help him, see what he gave me?" Just

because of [our] appearance he [Hispanic salesperson] didn't want to give us a hand.

## Barriers to Achieving the Dream for Latinos

Barriers to achieving the American dream as identified in our focus groups overlap somewhat with those cited by the survey respondents in the previous studies, specifically problems with both the quality of schools and discrimination. However, other noted obstacles were more likely to be immigrant-specific concerns. The most frequently cited barrier is a problem for many immigrants from non-English-speaking countries, English proficiency. Another widely acknowledged barrier, sometimes expressed as an individual concern but more commonly identified as a barrier for Latino immigrants in general, was legal status, either their lack of citizenship or lack of documentation.

With respect to the top obstacle, there was universal agreement across the focus groups that limited English proficiency decreased the likelihood of achieving success with respect to jobs and equal treatment. The following examples directly illustrate how participants tied job advancement and upward mobility with having good English speaking skills:

*Mario (Washington, DC, S):* Language is the most difficult barrier. Moving up and making more money depends on speaking good English.

*Cubia (Washington, DC, S):* If you don't know English, you work in jobs that nobody wants with low pay and sometimes no pay.

*Nicholas (Houston, E):* The guy that's been there the longest is Mexican. . . . The fact that he hasn't moved up, like the other guys that are equal to him at that time is because the fact that he doesn't speak English well. . . . That's what's holding him back.

*Ivan (New York, E):* I think they [immigrants] would have to speak English. If you don't speak English you will not get a good job. I studied [in] high school and it was different when I came here because of the accents, but English is the key.

Legal status or, more specifically, the lack of documentation to regularize their status, was a topic of personal concern for only a few participants. However, multiple people in every focus group said that they personally knew Latinos who were undocumented and described the difficulties faced by these individuals regarding matters of employment, education, and place of residence due to their illegal status. Others also lamented the fact that they, or their spouse, were not U.S. citizens, and that this put them at a disadvantage in the workplace and in going to college:

*Arturo (Washington, DC, S):* When you don't have papers it is harder to find work and people who know or think you don't have papers will treat you bad.

*Randy (New York, E):* If you don't have a green card you can't get into a university.

*Man (Los Angeles, E):* They take advantage of the Latino workers. They don't pay them the salaries they are supposed to get paid. I know a girl working three different jobs. She doesn't get the pay she deserves. She is illegal and they take advantage of it.

*Marie (Houston, S):* I know my husband would have kept his job if he were a citizen.

Concern for the poor quality of education noted by survey respondents was echoed in the comments of focus group participants, especially those who had direct experience with the secondary schools in large urban areas such as Houston, New York City, and Miami. Their comments regarding problems identified with these urban school districts are highlighted in Chapter 3, *Education: Latinos' Great Hope, America's Harsh Reality*. However, it is also important to note that participants in these same cities were very satisfied and appreciative of the opportunities provided by higher education in their areas. For example, a common theme in their comments was the acknowledgment that both participants and their children were "doing better financially because [they were] now able to go to college" and "achieved greater success in their careers because they went to college."

## Latino Optimism for the Attainability of the American Dream

Like most of the surveyed Americans, Latinos think the American dream is becoming harder to achieve, but overall they are optimistic about the prospect of attaining it, for themselves and for Latinos collectively. For example, in a New York focus group, the moderator asked participants, "What is the future of the Latino here in the United States?" The replies were:

*Multiple respondents (New York, E):* "Whatever you make it."

"Good, if you know how to defend yourself and know what you are doing" "Good, there are lots of opportunities with education, so anyone who comes can do it" "The opportunities are there, but you have to look for them. They will not find you. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes." (*Collective agreement*): "Yeah."

One comment from an immigrant in Los Angeles is especially illustrative of the optimism shared among many of the foreign-born respondents:

*Immigrant man (Los Angeles, E):* As time goes by, they [Latinos] can elevate their position. I started in warehouse sales and moved up making more money. Dreams don't die; they only die if you don't pursue them.

Perhaps the best indicator of the continuing appeal of the American dream for foreign-born and U.S.-born Latinos alike is found in their commonly expressed preferences to remain in the United States when asked whether they (focus group participants) could see themselves returning or moving to home/ancestral countries on a permanent basis. The response of an immigrant from Chile captures the sentiment expressed by many foreign-born:

*Graciela, immigrant (Washington, DC, S):* This place is everything I dream for and more. I like very much living



here. It is beautiful, tranquil. My son has a good job, he is happy. . . . My son's children will go to the university. . . . I am staying here.

Second-generation and higher respondents generations were even more direct in expressing their commitment to remaining in the United States to attain their long-term goals. As reported in the introductory remarks of this chapter, whenever the moderator asked second- and third-generation Latinos whether they could ever imagine themselves immigrating to their family's home country, their immediate and unanimous response was an emphatic "NO!" Moreover, the follow-up conversations clearly supported the conclusion of one participant, who reported: "The quality of life I want is only found in the United States."

### Is Assimilation Part of the American Dream?

Given these understandings of Latinos' aspirations about the American dream, especially their focus on economic success and security, do their views on related topics suggest that assimilation is seen as (implicitly or explicitly) part of, essential, or instrumental to their realization of "living the dream?" Is the extent of assimilation itself suggestive of some movement toward the American dream? To explore these possibilities, let us begin with a brief discussion of the complex concept of assimilation. We can then consider Latinos' understanding(s) of the concept as well as the extent to which Latinos appear to be thinking, acting, and experiencing social outcomes that seem compatible with movement toward assimilation and, in turn, toward something approaching the American dream.

### The Complexity of Assimilation

There is no simple or widely agreed upon definition of "assimilation" except to say that it refers to a multigenerational process by which the "characteristics of members of immigrant groups and host societies come to resemble one another" (Brown and Bean 2006). Early articulations of the concept (still in vogue among Huntington and others who believe in a single Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture) were normative

and prescriptive. Assimilation was characterized as a "straight-line" progression whereby all immigrants eventually conform, abandoning their original cultural attributes and adopting the behaviors and customs of the Anglo-Saxon majority as they advance both socially and economically (Park 1950; Warner and Srole 1945). Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* (1964) more accurately described a process that was considerably more complex, involving numerous dimensions besides culture and the possibility of different outcomes besides Anglo-Saxon conformity. Later scholars of assimilation no longer claim that conformity is even necessarily a desirable outcome (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Today, the classic model of assimilation ("straight-line") has essentially been eclipsed by a variety of alternative theories of how the process occurs (for example, "bumpy-line," "segmented," "two-way"), with differing opinions on which dimensions of assimilation are most important for immigrants and minorities to survive and thrive within the larger society (Alba and Nee 2003; Gans 1996; Portes and Zhou 1993). Still, most scholars agree that certain factors can delay or even block assimilation. Two of these factors include racial/ethnic discrimination and governmental policies that limit social and economic mobility (Brown and Bean 2006).

### Cultural Assimilation

According to Gordon (1964), *cultural* assimilation, or alternatively "acculturation," is likely to be the first adaptation to occur when immigrants come into contact with the majority population. Acculturation refers to the *two-way* process whereby both immigrants and majority citizens adjust their values and behaviors, as opposed to the classical view of assimilation that the direction of change is only one way, whereby immigrants change their appearance, diet, language, religion, social customs, and core values to comply with those of the majority. Some cultural practices (for example, attire, eating habits, and social customs) are considered more easily surrendered than others (for example, core values or religious identity), but "changing" is not necessarily a subtractive process. Gibson (1988) argues that assimilation/acculturation is *selective* and should be viewed as additive in purpose; that is, minority individuals make deliberate decisions to adopt certain

TABLE 2-2 IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING ENGLISH/RETAINING SPANISH ACROSS GENERATIONS (IN PERCENTAGES) AMONG LNS RESPONDENTS

Generation	Learn English		Retain Spanish	
	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
First	5.5	94.5	9.9	90.0
Second	9.5	90.3	12.5	87.4
Third	12.9	86.8	18.9	80.7
Fourth	13.7	85.7	25.5	73.9

LNS = Latino National Survey

practices of the majority that they think are useful to their future success. They also work to retain salient ethnic cultural traits. In turn, the majority often adopts from the minority culture whatever they find appealing.

English proficiency is widely considered to be the most important aspect of cultural adaptation: if immigrants are to be successful outside of their ethnic enclaves, but immigrants may also value the retention of their native languages (Alba and Nee 2003). We can see evidence of this longing to "have it both ways" in LNS respondents' answers to contrasting questions on learning Spanish and maintaining Spanish (Table 2-2). Especially among the foreign born (first generation), overwhelming majorities think it is very important to learn English while also thinking Spanish maintenance is very important: 84% and 89%, respectively.

The goal of being equally proficient in both English and Spanish was also very evident in the comments of the focus group participants. Immigrant participants were keenly aware that they had problems communicating effectively in English, and many expressed the desire for their children, if not for themselves, that they would "get better" or "good at" speaking English. However, most of the Spanish speakers also wanted their children and grandchildren to be bilingual. U.S.-born participants were especially mindful of the economic advantages of being bilingual:

*Della (Miami, E):* Every time you look in the paper you have to be bilingual.

*Jose Luis (Muscatine, IA, S):* It is important to be bilingual. My brother lost his Spanish. He went to school and became

a lawyer [but] he had to change jobs because of his location and Spanish was the language most used and he didn't know it.

Participants in the English-language focus groups frequently expressed regret at not having made more of an effort to learn or maintain their Spanish and also to pass it along to their children. An exchange in one of the focus groups in New York is illustrative of this sentiment:

*Christopher (New York, E):* We want them to think like all the other races. . . . We want them to learn English. As long as there are grandmothers around, you are going to learn Spanish. It will be heard. That is what would happen to me. I wanted to shy away from Spanish, but I couldn't . . . I am glad now for it.

*Eric (New York, E):* That's the thing, while we are American, born here, we can't forget our heritage. My daughters, I try to teach them Spanish; I bought DVDs to teach them Spanish. They only speak English, and I am trying to tell their mother as well because you can never forget your heritage. We are American, and we do have to speak English well, but don't forget where you came from.

*Shirley (New York, E):* I think with every generation you lose more and more. I read and write Spanish, but growing up, my mother—born and raised in Puerto Rico—taught us Spanish and we learned our English in school, which to me was an advantage because here in New York, they know how to speak it but not write it, and it is good to know it all. . . . I do get disappointed with myself for not teaching my daughters.

Interestingly, the level of English proficiency and Spanish retention among the U.S. Latino population is something about which there is a great deal of information. A great deal of longitudinal data is available on the topic from the U.S. Census Bureau and from other national studies. Basically, the data are consistent across these sources. Roberto Suro, former Director of the Pew Hispanic Center, aptly summarizes the findings from these data:

[A]bout three-quarters of foreign-born Latinos, the first generation, speaks only Spanish and the rest of the immigrants are bilingual to some extent. The second generation—the children of immigrants—are about evenly divided between English speakers and bilinguals, with almost none reaching adulthood speaking only Spanish. And, among Hispanics of longer tenure in the U.S.—those born here, of American-born parents—more than three-quarters speak only English and the rest are bilingual to some extent, though often their Spanish is weak. So we know for certain that a transition to English is taking place across generations with a lot of bilingualism along the way (Suro 2006: 3).

We also know something about another indicator of cultural assimilation that, according to Cordon (1964), is significantly less subject to change: religious affiliation and practices. Religious identity was characterized by Gordon as an intrinsic trait that is “essential and vital to a groups’ cultural heritage” (Cordon 1964: 72). Change in their traditional affiliation (which is Catholicism for Latinos) to Protestantism, the predominant religious identity of American society, could be viewed as a convincing measure of cultural adaptation. We find evidence of this type of assimilation from a national telephone survey of 2,310 Latinos conducted in 2000 on religious life in the United States. According to the survey:

- The first generation of Latino immigrants is 74% Catholic and 15% Protestant.
- The second generation is 72% Catholic and 20% Protestant.
- The third generation is 62% Catholic and 29% Protestant (Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda 2005).

We also see evidence of religious adaptation when we look at the levels of Catholicism across generations among respondents in the 2006 LNS. Looking at the first row of Table 2-3, we can see a modest but steady decline in the numbers of Catholics with each generation. The biggest drop in Catholics [or Catholicism] occurs between the third and fourth generations.

TABLE 2-3 SELECTED MARKERS OF ASSIMILATION ACROSS GENERATIONS (IN PERCENTAGES) AMONG LNS RESPONDENTS

	<i>First</i>	<i>Second</i>	<i>Third</i>	<i>Fourth</i>
Roman Catholic	73.6	70.6	65.0	58.0
Participation in civic groups	14.1	23.4	29.3	31.7
Has mostly Latino friends	44.6	28.0	22.0	16.7
Military service	15.9	46.3	66.3	68.5
Education less than high school	48.7	23.1	18.4	17.3
Household income less than \$35,000	53.3	35.6	28.5	34.2
Married to non-Latinos	13.5	28.9	38.9	49.1

LNS = Latino National Survey

As hypothesized by Gordon, the change in Latino religious affiliation is occurring more slowly relative to other aspects of cultural assimilation. The difficulty or reluctance in changing religious practices was discussed by immigrant participants in the Washington, DC, focus group who were fully bilingual and participated in our English-speaking session:

*Man (Washington, DC, E):* There is a church here in Alexandria in Spanish, but sometimes I go to the one in English even though the one in Spanish is easier to understand. The Americans that go to church still seem cold, while the Mexicans show they care.

*Woman (Washington, DC, E):* I still can't learn the prayers in English.

*Man (Washington, DC, E):* I had the same experience. I made my communion over there when I was 17, and all prayers were in Spanish. Then I came here and I had to learn them in English, and I can't relate to them. I know them though.

*Woman (Washington, DC, E):* I learned them in Spanish, and I came here when I was 24, and I have found it very difficult to learn them or say anything in English. I can't follow the Mass in English.

Changing religious affiliation is seemingly one critical indicator of assimilation, but it could be argued that it may be more important for Latinos to be attending churches with significant numbers of

non-Latinos. Participation in integrated mainstream organizations is an important component of *structural* assimilation, the entrance into or participation of minority individuals in primary groups and institutions of the majority society (Brown and Bean 2006; Gordon 1964). Whenever church or religion was discussed in the focus groups, there were always some participants who said the membership of the church they attended was mixed, including some that said their church was mostly Anglo. However, there were always other participants who said they felt "more comfortable" attending services that were conducted in Spanish or with their co-ethnics.

### Structural Assimilation

Gordon deemed that once structural assimilation begins, it stimulates all other dimensions of assimilation. Activities as varied as participation in integrated social/civic/work organizations, friendships with persons outside of one's ethnic group, and U.S. military service are all indicators of structural assimilation. Increasing levels of education and home ownership are also proxy measures of structural assimilation (Brown and Bean 2006). We see evidence of increasing structural assimilation among the LNS respondents across generations along most of these indicators when we examine rows two through five in Table 2-3. The biggest change in each of these measures occurs between the first (foreign-born) and second (U.S.-born) generations.

The sharp decline in the percentage of those with less than high school education somewhat overstates the improvement in educational status of Latinos (primarily because the Latino dropout rate continues to be a serious problem), but the only indicator on this table that does not show steady improvement across generations is household income. There is substantial improvement between the first and second generations, reflected by the big drop in the percentage making less than \$35,000, but the decline is small between the second and third generations and actually increases between the third and fourth generations.

Further evidence of structural assimilation was revealed when focus group participants discussed the race/ethnicity of their co-workers and friends and their degree of interaction with them. Many referenced in a very positive light the racial/ethnic diversity of their

workplaces and neighborhoods. Many said that they socialized regularly with non-Latino co-workers and friends. Interestingly, however, those they considered "close friends" were more likely to be fellow Latinos. Participants in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles also noted that they felt "more comfortable doing different things" with their non-Latino friends, such as going to the gym, and had "more fun partying" or simply "hanging out" with their Latino friends. This suggests that their structural assimilation is selective. They are comfortable in integrated work and social settings, but at times they prefer to be with people from their own culture. On the other hand, recent immigrants and participants who had recently relocated to rural towns were more likely to live almost segregated lives, reporting that their co-workers, friends, and neighbors were all mostly Latino and that the attitudes of long-term residents were "not friendly."

### Marital Assimilation

The incorporation of Latinos into the American fabric may be occurring primarily through marital or family integration. Over the past 30 years the number of Latinos marrying non-Latino spouses has more than doubled, from 600,000 in 1970 to 1.8 million in 2000. This is a significant trend since the same data show that many Latino immigrants arrive already married. Even with the surge in Latino immigration between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of Latino intermarriages remained fairly stable: between 23% and 25%. As the proportion of U.S.-born Latinos increases relative to the proportion of foreign-born, the percentage of intermarriages is predicted to climb even higher (Lee and Edmonston 2005).

The reported pattern of increasing marital assimilation is clearly shown across the generations of LNS respondents (see the bottom row of Table 2-3). Again, as with previously discussed indicators, the biggest change occurs between the first and second generation, but there is at least a 10% increase with each subsequent generation. By the fourth generation, over half of the respondents are married to non-Latinos.

These aggregate indicators are reflected in the marital circumstances of our focus group participants. Although approximately

one third of the participants were single or divorced, many of these reported having parents or siblings who were married to non-Latinos. Having non-Latino spouses was very common among the U.S.-born married participants; about half reported they were married to non-Latinos. Out-group marriages were far less common among immigrant participants, with several reporting that they immigrated to the United States with their wives/husbands.

The significance of having a non-Latino American spouse for facilitating the process of becoming a part of the majority society is best illustrated by the comments of a Miami participant who immigrated to this country as an adult from Majorca, Spain:

*Rosa (Miami, E):* I came here when I was 21 years old. . . . I am an outsider. My husband is American. He is from upstate New York. A little town in upstate New York and also has family in Pennsylvania. They never make me feel like an outsider. They try to talk to me slowly when I first came to this country and be friendly and give me all that food. I was like "Oh, my God. What is that? Give me some snails to eat." But they were friendly and everything. . . . They don't make me feel outsider.

It is equally significant to note that marriage to a non-Latino does not necessarily result in the loss of Latino cultural ties. Participants' comments seem to suggest that acculturation is the more common effect as families learned to appreciate, or at least accept, the customs and practices of the different cultures. The following, somewhat lengthy, Miami focus group discussion regarding the differences in holiday practices provides several acculturation examples.

*Omar (Miami, E):* My wife is American. They're very relaxed like most people but when I say "party," I want to go to a Latin people party. Let's say for Christmas, celebrating Christmas with a Latin family is very different than an American family. I like it better with the Latin family, even though I spend most of the time with my wife's family because my parents are not here.

*Toni (Miami, E):* The customs are different. Like for Christmas, Christmas Eve for Hispanics is a big thing, whereas for Americans they celebrate more on Christmas day than Christmas Eve.

*Joni (Miami, E):* I have been here long enough to celebrate both ways but we keep our traditions. We do the *Noche Buena*, the Christmas Eve. We invite a lot of people.

*Marisol (Miami, E):* When it's work related, I will go with anybody. I work as a realtor and there are a lot of nationalities where I work. . . . But when it comes to something personal, I would rather stick with what I know and like, which is the Latin side of my life. When it comes to me and my family . . . the weird part is growing up here and being from another country is really sometimes you are like this: "Christmas Eve, Christmas day, what do I do?" Sometimes you end up doing both, which is a lot of fun. Because I love Thanksgiving, and I was raised in New York where Thanksgiving is Thanksgiving. But then I get down here [Miami], and they are having Cuban food at 11:00 at night. It's weird. When I was in New York, we knew we had to eat turkey, got dressed, the table was totally beautiful. Down here it's different.

*Joni (Miami, E):* I think it's because they like food and they like partying, because Thanksgiving is not part of Cuban tradition. And yet, Cubans and Hispanics in general celebrate Thanksgiving as if they have been celebrating it their whole life. They take advantage of both, their heritage and what they've learned in this country. Because there is no such thing as Thanksgiving over there. Take advantage of both.

*Maria (Miami, E):* My mother came to the U.S., my [American] father brought her to the U.S., and she was raised most of her life in Majorca. You celebrate Thanksgiving and you have a turkey and you stuff it with bread and it was so foreign to her. So she had to transition. She always put her spin on it. She always put chorizo in the sauces. . . . She had to incorporate in her Latin experience to celebrate American tradition.

## Self-recognized Importance of Adapting to "American" Ways

As originally detailed in Chapter 1, the self-reported characteristics of participants suggest there is great variation in the level or extent of assimilation represented among the focus groups. Some participants who were in this country for less than one year and spoke only Spanish appeared to be just beginning the process, while others, primarily second- and third-generation participants who spoke only English, were clearly further along in the process of fitting into American society. However, recognition of the importance of assimilation or at least "accommodating American ways" was evident in similar comments made in practically every focus group we held. For example:

*Woman (Los Angeles, E):* If you come from Mexico with attitude, you are going to have lots of problems. If you come willing to adapt, you won't have problems. . . . Pride is a big killer. Sometimes you will have to go down to go up. You might be the most educated person and start out as a housekeeper with a company, just to get your foot in the door.

*Immigrant woman (Washington, DC, S):* When you come to the U.S., you have to accustom yourself or nothing. . . . Do whatever it takes.

*Marisol, immigrant in U.S. 10 years (Miami, E):* I really believe that everybody should learn English personally. If you're here, you should speak English. If some people want the schools in Spanish, I think that's wrong. . . . You have to change.

*Nicholas (Houston, E):* There ain't no leaders in the Hispanic [community] that you can talk to. So anytime you want to move ahead you have to talk to some other races. We ain't got no presidents. . . . There is nobody in office for us, you know what I mean? For us to even get there we would have to go through another race. You have to be able to adapt, you got to learn other things.

## Conclusions

It seems that Latinos share the same vision as other working-class Americans of what it means to be successful and satisfied in life. Their focus is primarily on material success and economic opportunities and not on political freedoms or the more abstract ideas identified with those in the middle class. While some of our focus group participants appear to be very satisfied with where they currently live and work, most are still striving to reach their life goals. For the most part, participants' attitudes about the future for themselves and for Latinos in general are upbeat and confident.

Interestingly, in most cases, immigrant participants were generally more satisfied and optimistic than the U.S.-born we talked with. Perhaps because the U.S.-born were significantly more aware of the barriers to upward mobility, they were less optimistic and more cynical about the prospects of achieving their dreams as they defined them. They also seemed to be more aware that many of the obstacles were out of their control, such as the quality of schools and the attitudes of elected officials or residents (including other Latinos) in new receiving communities.

As previously stated, Latinos know they must adapt—at least in some ways—if they want to improve their status. They clearly recognize that they must learn to speak English (and to speak it well) if they are to have continued success in moving up the socioeconomic ladder. However, judging from the other information presented here, from a variety of credible aggregate sources, and from the individual comments from those in our focus groups, there are other signs besides English acquisition that Latinos are integrating into American society—through marriage, friendships, churches, and military service, for example. The ways that Latinos are becoming a part of the American fabric are similar to the behaviors followed by previous waves of immigrants (Sassler 2006); from this perspective Latinos' behavior reflects more continuity than change.

Yet, the decision to adapt (assimilate) is complicated by the fact that Latinos also want to maintain their cultural traditions, such as their Spanish proficiency (as we saw in their answers presented in Table 2-2). Further evidence of the complexity or contradictions in



TABLE 2-4 PREFERENCE FOR CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AND DISTINCTNESS (IN PERCENTAGES) AMONG LNS RESPONDENTS

Generation	Blend into Larger Society		Maintain Distinct Culture	
	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
First	27.2	60.4	16.8	78.3
Second	33.4	42.1	18.0	75.7
Third	36.9	37.7	20.3	74.2
Fourth	37.5	34.0	26.0	66.0

LNS = Latino National Survey

Latinos' feelings about assimilation can be seen in Table 2-4, which provides LNS respondents' answers to questions regarding how important they think it is for Latinos to attempt to "blend into the larger American society" and also to "maintain their distinct cultures." Large majorities in each generation say *both behaviors* are somewhat or very important. Moreover, support for blending into the larger culture and for maintaining a distinct culture is positively related ( $r = .1415$ ); they are not viewed as either/or propositions.

The likelihood of Latinos fully incorporating into American society is obviously complicated. The pursuit of the American dream and subsequent Latino incorporation faces potential roadblocks—some mentioned by focus group participants, such as poor schools, legal status, and discrimination. The next two chapters look specifically at barriers Latino participants indicated they face on the path to [making the U.S. "home"] achieving their version of the American dream: the challenges in education and experiences of discrimination.



### 3 Education

#### *Latinos' Great Hope, America's Harsh Reality*

E ducation has long been understood as a primary means through which Americans of all backgrounds and incomes can gain the skills to realize the opportunities that are likely to lead to upward social, economic, and political mobility in the United States (Hochschild 1984, 1995; Hochschild and Scovronick 2004). Few would argue, however, that the American system of public education has worked equally well in this way for all groups, especially ethnic minorities, racial minorities, and immigrants (Tyack 1974; Tyack and Cuban 1995). To attempt to overcome these limitations in educational policy and practice, access to high-quality education has often been a primary goal of these groups and their advocates, motivated by the hope that the civic knowledge and marketable job skills that often come with education can serve as the foundation for increasing chances for upward mobility (Patterson 2002). Latinos are no exception in this regard. They have long worked to push American schools to provide their children better educational opportunities to realize the American dream (for example, see San Miguel 1987).